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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 DUBLIN 000433

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SUBJECT: SARKOZY IN DUBLIN -- IN LISTENING MODE

Classified By: DCM Robert J. Faucier. Reasons 1.4 (b/d).

¶1. Summary: On July 21, French President Nicolas Sarkozy spent five hours in Dublin meeting with the Irish Prime Minister Brian Cowen, the heads of the main opposition parties, and a gathering of representatives from both the pro- and anti-Lisbon Treaty camps. Cowen impressed upon Sarkozy that it was unrealistic to think that Ireland would hold another referendum this year or even prior to the June 2009 European Parliament (EP) election. Seeming to accept this, Sarkozy later stated publicly that the crisis caused by Ireland's rejection of the Lisbon Treaty referendum will not be solved during the French EU Presidency. The leaders of the opposition parties also stressed that a second referendum would be impossible before the June 2009 EP elections. Representatives at the "Yes/No" meeting appreciated Sarkozy's effort to engage all interested parties but there is still a pool of resentment lingering over Sarkozy's pre-visit comments that the Irish must hold a second referendum. We do not expect the Irish to propose a solution to this crisis prior to the October European Council meeting. Further, Sarkozy's visit is unlikely to have fully repaired the hit to Irish-French relations brought on by his comments that many here view as "meddling in Irish affairs." End summary.

Trying to Patch Things Up

¶2. (U) On July 21, during his brief visit to Dublin, Nicolas Sarkozy, French (and European Council) President, admitted that the crisis caused by Ireland's rejection of the Lisbon Treaty referendum will not be solved during the French EU Presidency. Sarkozy angered many in the Irish political establishment by reportedly insisting shortly before his trip that the Irish government hold a second referendum on the Treaty. Sarkozy denied having said another referendum was needed and instead maintained that he said that, "the Irish had to be given the opportunity to give their opinion."

¶3. (C) The Office of the Taoiseach's (the Prime Minister) Lorcan Fullam, who helped arrange Sarkozy's visit, told us that the meeting between Cowen and Sarkozy was cordial and that Sarkozy "did not bring a proposal to the Taoiseach" as was widely reported in the press. Instead, he was very much in listening mode. Fullam said that, based on this discussion, Sarkozy "has a greater appreciation that a second referendum this year is just not going to happen." He said that holding a referendum even by June 2009 is unlikely. Based on conversations the Irish government has had with its EU partners, Fullam noted "a growing recognition in EU capitals that a referendum, if one is held, will take place after the EU Parliament elections in June 2009." Regarding the next meeting between Cowen and Sarkozy in September in Paris, Fullam said that "this was more than just an opportunity to touch base; it will be a way for Cowen and Sarkozy to shape the agenda of the October European Council meeting."

Meeting the Opposition

¶4. (C) Sarkozy followed his meeting with Cowen by having short, separate meetings with the leaders of the two main opposition parties -- Enda Kenny, head of Fine Gael (FG), and Eamon Gilmore, Labor chief. According to press reports, Kenny added that between now and October was a "period of reflection and analysis." Sarkozy reportedly emphasized that next June's Europe-wide elections imposes some time pressure to resolve the issue. Both told Sarkozy that a second Lisbon Treaty referendum before next June's elections is not possible. Mark Kennelly, Kenny's chief of staff, told us that FG was "quite happy" with the meeting and Sarkozy's trip overall. He said that FG leaders believe Fall 2009 is the most "realistic timetable if there were to be a second referendum." Gilmore, who has led calls against a second referendum, has told the Embassy separately that he fully expects, and would support, holding a second referendum in ¶2009. He explained his public posture of opposition to a second referendum as "politically necessary" for the time being.

Roundtable at the French Embassy

¶5. (C) After the meeting with the Irish opposition leaders, Sarkozy went to the French Embassy for a roundtable discussion with pro- and anti-Lisbon Treaty campaigners. According to participants in the meeting, Sarkozy reiterated his view that the Treaty crisis will not be solved during the French EU Presidency. While a "casual and relaxed" Sarkozy listened intently to the speakers, he did interrupt on several occasions -- most notably when Libertas founder Declan Ganley declared the Lisbon Treaty dead. Sinn Fein

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President Gerry Adams followed this by stating that the Treaty had been rejected by the people and a new version was needed. Sarkozy was quick to refute some of these -- and other -- allegations made by the "No" side. Pat Smith, a representative of the Irish Farmers Association (IFA), told us bluntly that they used the occasion to call for Peter Mandelson to be relieved of his duties as EU Trade Commissioner because, as they claim, he is bringing in a bad WTO deal for Irish farmers.

¶6. (C) One observer told us that almost all participants left the meeting satisfied that they had their say. The one exception was Sinn Fein, whose special representative to the U.S. Rita O'Hare complained that her organization was the only "staunch No camp supporter there." She maintained that many parties did not have enough time (each was allotted three minutes) to effectively communicate their message. In general, she said that there is quite a bit of anger across the political spectrum at the way Sarkozy handled his visit.

Comment

¶7. (C) Clearly, there is no appetite in Irish political circles for another run at a referendum anytime soon. Based on Sarkozy's comments focusing on the June 2009 elections and Fullam's comments to us, this fact was undoubtedly successfully impressed upon him. Cowen and Sarkozy will meet in Paris in September ahead of the European Council meeting in October to plot strategy, but it is unlikely the Irish will have (or will be actively seeking) a solution in advance of the October meeting. As for Irish-French relations, Sarkozy appeared to be in damage control mode and -- thanks to his "I'm-here-to-listen" attitude -- managed to leave with more goodwill than when he arrived.

FOLEY